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AUTHOR Rohner, Ronald P.
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ABSTRACT

Guided by specific theoretical and methodological points of view--the phylogenetic perspective and the universalistic approach respectively--this paper reports on a worldwide study of the antecedents and effects of parental acceptance and rejection. Parental acceptance-rejection theory postulates that rejected children throughout our species share in common a constellation of personality characteristics different from the personality dispositions of accepted children. Specifically, rejected children are more likely than accepted children to be hostile, aggressive or passive aggressive (or to have problems with the management of hostility and aggression), to be dependent, emotionally unresponsive, emotionally unstable, to have impaired feelings of self esteem and self adequacy, and to have a negative world view. In addition, the theory postulates certain worldwide antecedents of parental rejection and acceptance, and the theory also predicts certain expressive systems outcomes to parental acceptance-rejection. Cross-cultural and intracultural tests confirm hypotheses derived from acceptance-rejection theory. (Author)

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PARENTAL ACCEPTANCE-REJECTION THEORY AND THE PHYLOGENETIC MODEL

Ronald P. Rohner

University of Connecticut

This paper describes a worldwide study of parental acceptance-rejection and relates this work to the phylogenetic model of human behavior. Even though research is still in progress, sufficient work has been done during the past decade to allow some conclusions to be drawn about the worldwide antecedents and consequences of parental acceptance-rejection—conclusions which seem to hold true across our species regardless of differences in race, nationality, time, or other limiting conditions.

Definition of Parental Acceptance and Rejection

Parental rejection and acceptance together form the warmth dimension of parenting. Parental warmth is a bipolar dimension where rejection, or the absence of warmth and affection, stands at one pole of the scale in opposition to acceptance at the other pole. All humans can be placed somewhere along this continuum because each of us has received more or less warmth and affection at the hands of the persons most important to us, usually our parents. Parents may show their love or affection toward children either physically or verbally. Physical affection, for example, may be shown by fondling, hugging, kissing, or caressing a child. Verbal affection may be shown in such says as saying nice things to or about the child, complimenting him, or by praising him.

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Rejecting parents often dislike, disapprove of or resent their children. In many cases they view the child as a burden and they sometimes compare him unfavorably with other children. Rejection is manifested around the world in two principal ways, namely, in the form of parental hostility and aggression on the one hand, and in the form of parental indifference and neglect on the other (Rohner, 1975b). Hostility and indifference refer to parents' internal feelings and attitudes. Hostility refers to feelings of anger, resentment, and enmity toward the child, whereas indifference refers to a lack of concern or interest in the child. Aggression and neglect, on the other hand, are forms of observable behavior motivated by each of these internal states, respectively. That is, hostile parents are likely to be aggressive, either verbally or physically. Aggressive parents may hit, kick, push, pinch, bite, or scratch their children, and they can say thoughtless, unkind and cruel things to or about their children, curse them, be sarcastic toward them, and so forth. Indifferent parents, however, are likely to neglect their children—to be physically or psychologically remote from them or inaccessible to them, to ignore their children's bids for attention, help, or comfort, and to be unresponsive to the child's physical and emotional needs. Such parents show a restricted concern for their child's welfare. They pay as little attention to him as they can, and they spend a minimum amount of time with him. Not infrequently they forget promises made to him, and they fail to attend to other details or needs important to his happiness or well-being.

Parental acceptance-rejection theory predicts that parental rejection has consistent effects on the personality development of children everywhere, as well as on the personality functioning of adults who were rejected as children. Research and clinical experience in Europe and America support

this expectation in that rejection has been implicated in a wide range of psychiatric and behavioral disorders including neuroses, perhaps schizophrenia, delinquency and conduct problems, psychosomatic reactions such as different allergies, poor concept formation and academic problems, disturbed body image, stuttering, and so on. The list is so long that I suspect parental rejection may be a lurking variable in most psychogenic disorders.

Research Design: The Universalist Approach

Before continuing with a discussion about the worldwide consequences of parental acceptance-rejection, something should be said about the way the information is being collected. Since our interest is in establishing verified generalizations or "principles" of human behavior, generalizations which hold true across our species wherever specified conditions occur, then one of the first considerations is to have an adequate worldwide sample. With this requirement in mind a stratified sample of anthropological reports was drawn representing 101 adequately described cultural systems of the world. Pertinent data in these written works were coded, and then computerized tests of relationship were run. This procedure—called the holocultural method—measures the modalities or regularities of customary behavior within total communities the world over. The holocultural method is excellent for distinguishing culturally conditioned from universal causal/functional relationships, although it gives no information about variations in individual behavior within any given society.

In order to compensate for this limitation we also work within individual communities in different cultural settings. Also, because acceptance-rejection theory postulates that rejected children everywhere respond

in like manner to the effects of rejection—regardless of the culture where the children live, of the children's physical type, or of other limiting conditions—one would expect that rejected children within any community where the cultural norm is toward parental warmth would, in certain respects, share more in common with rejected children living in different cultural systems than they would share with their own siblings who were accepted. Fieldwork in different communities around the world allows us to test this and related expectations. We study not only the way of life of the people in these communities, but concentrate also on the interaction between samples of parents and children, as well as on the personality functioning of children and of adults. This cross-cultural community study methodology helps to disentangle the effects of culture from universal developmental tendencies postulated by acceptance-rejection theory. The cross-cultural community study approach has some disadvantages too, however. One such disadvantage is the difficulty and costliness of cross-cultural research. These community studies generally require a year or more to complete. But before even beginning, investigators must often learn a native language. Moreover, it is sometimes impossible to manipulate or vary factors as easily in cross-cultural research as it is in an American or European setting.

Motivated by these practical considerations, a substantial amount of research has been done in the United States, and of course we draw heavily on the work of other researchers there. Conventional psychological research in America and Europe has its disadvantages too, however, one of the principal ones being that there is no way in this kind of intracultural research to distinguish the effects of culture-learning from more general, species-wide developmental tendencies. It is obvious, then, that all three of these

methodological orientations—that is, holocultural research, cross-cultural community research, and intracultural developmental research have certain advantages and disadvantages; each gives certain kinds of information but not others, and each has the potential built into it for certain kinds of bias. When, however, a proposition survives the onslaught of all three methodologies—each with its own strengths and imperfections—then we can be reasonably sure that the results truly relate to human beings everywhere, and are not an artifact of the special methods used, of the cultural group or social class where the work was done, of the distinct physical characteristics of a particular population, or of other such potentially limiting conditions. In other words, one can be reasonably sure that he has successfully identified a "principle" of human behavior. This multimethod research design which searches for verifiable principles of behavior is known as the "universalist approach" to behavioral science (Rohner, 1975a, 1975b).

Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory and the Phylogenetic Model

Following the dictates of the universalist approach, and in support of the postulates of parental acceptance-rejection theory,we have now been able to demonstrate that humans the world over do tend to respond in consistent ways to parental acceptance-rejection (Rohner, 1975b, in press). In this work we have been concerned mainly with a limited constellation of personality dispositions, dispositions that are an expectable outcome of parental hostility/aggression, or indifference/neglect. To be more specific, acceptance-rejection theory predicts that rejected children everywhere tend more than accepted children to be: hostile, aggressive, passive aggressive, or to have problems with the management of hostility and aggression; to be dependent or "defensively independent," depending on the degree of rejection; to

have an impaired sense of self-esteem and self-adequacy; to be emotionally unstable; emotionally unresponsive; and to have a negative world view. These expectations have been confirmed repeatedly in a world sample of 101 societies (Rohner, 1975b), in the U.S.A. (Rohner and Turner, n.d.)., in Puerto Rico (Saavedra, 1977), and elsewhere. With some notable exceptions, the magnitude of the typical correlation between parental warmth and the predicted outcome behaviors averages around .25 to .45. Thus by itself parental acceptance-rejection seems to explain roughly 5% to 20% of the variance in behavioral dispositions of children and adults. Over 80% of the variance is to be explained by other, largely unknown things.

A variety of factors contribute to the modest correlations between parental warmth and personality. Among these is the fact that some rejected children truely do not respond to parental rejection the way the majority of children do. Who are these children? What is different about them that allows them to remain largely unaffected by the corrosive effects of parental rejection?

It is here where the phylogenetic model seems to be especially helpful in that it allows investigators to look to the child himself as an active contributor to his own destiny. The phylogenetic model postulates in general that human behavior at any given point in time (i.e., synchronically) as well as human development over time (i.e., diachronically) are a function in as yet unspecified form of the interaction between an individual's biological state (including genotype) and experience, but that the effects of this interaction can be modified by the individual's mental activity.[1] This interactionist perspective is denoted in the following phylogenetic model:

$$B_h = f[(BE)C]$$

where B_h = Human behavior (and human development)

B = Biological state, including an individual's genotype (i.e., complete genetic endowment). "Biological state" includes here the biological structure and processes of the body—e.g., the nervous system, including the senses, and endocrine system, etc. Biological state also includes here species evolved, phylogenetically acquired potentialities and dispositions for behavior. Developmentally biological state refers to maturational processes (i.e., organismic growth).

E = Experience (i.e., anything to which an individual reacts as a living being). "Experience" includes the history of all experiences an individual has had, probably from the moment of conception, but certainly since birth—including the kind of experience called learning (and culture-learning). "Experience" includes experiences with the physical world, the social or interpersonal world, and with one's self.

C = Cognition, mental activity, or "intelligence" in its most general (Piagetian) sense—but not I.Q. per se.

The phylogenetic model states that man's phylogenetically acquired, genetic potentialities for behavior as well as man's biological processes and structure may be altered by experience. Potentialities for behavior may also be modified by mental activity including volition (or "will"). To illustrate, humans have the phylogenetically acquired (B) predisposition to respond in consistent ways to parental rejection (E), for example to develop an impaired sense of self-esteem and to become less emotionally responsive than persons who are accepted by their parents. Some rejected children, however, do not develop these expectable negative characteristics to the same extent as

other rejected children. We call the former group "invulnerables." It is not wholly clear what the psychological and social/situational factors are that allow some children to remain somewhat unaffected by parental rejection, but it seems likely that children's "thinking," or "mental activity" (i.e., cognitive capabilities or "intelligence" in the general sense) has something to do with this invulnerability. Through conscious (recognized) and unconscious (unrecognized) "mental activity" these invulnerable children modify the usual phylogenetically acquired disposition of rejected children everywhere to respond negatively to the corrosive effects of parental hostility/aggression or parental indifference/neglect. That is, human cognition may—within definite limits—moderate the normal or expectable outcome of the interaction between genotype and experience. Thus within broad limits humans are not necessarily bound to the immutable but mindless forces of either biology or experience, or to the simple interaction between the two.[2]

The question that needs to be addressed now, if the phylogenetic model is leading in the right direction, is what form of mental activity is working to make some children more invulnerable than others to parental rejection? I believe that there are differences among vulnerable and invulnerable children in their sense of differentiated, autonomous self and in the degree to which they believe that they have control over themselves and their own lives.

In the course of normal development children gain over time an increasing awareness of themselves and of the world; they continuously develop a conception of self and others, and of their social relations. At any given age some children have a more differentiated sense of self than do other children (Witkin and Goodenough, 1976). That is, they are more aware of

themselves as distinct from the external world and all that is not "self;" they have an awareness of a separate identity. Since self-differentiation is one factor allowing a child to rely on himself as the primary referent in psychological functioning, children with greater degrees of self-differentiation may not be as affected by negative messages from a rejecting parent as are children with lesser degrees of self-differentiation. Thus a high degree of self-differentiation may contribute to a child's greater invulnerability to the negative effects of parental rejection.

Children also vary in the degree to which they believe they have control over their own lives (MacDonald, 1972; Rotter, 1966). Children with a belief in external locus of control, for example, believe that what happens to them is determined by forces external to them: by fate, chance, or by powerful others. Some children, however, feel that the locus of control lies within themselves. The child who relies on internal referents is able to function with a greater degree of separateness from others and to be more autonomous in interpersonal relations than the child who makes use of external referents.

It seems likely that a sense of differentiated self, separately or in combination with a sense of control over one's own life may help children resist some of the corrosive effects of parental rejection, i.e., to be more invulnerable than other children who have not developed these characteristics to the same degree. Thus part of the answer to the question, "Why invulnerability?" may lie in children's sense of self-differentiation along with their sense of having at least some influence over their own destiny.[3] Data collected on a small sample (n = 15) of fourth and fifth grade American school children who perceive themselves as rejected lend at least tentative support to these expectations (Rohner and Rohner, 1978).

FOOTNOTES

This paper was presented in an abbreviated form at the Fourth Biennial Meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development, Pavia, Italy, September 19 through 23, 1977. The paper was written while I was professor of Anthropology and Human Development at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, Ct., U.S.A. 06268. Requests for reprints should be sent to this address.

1. Part of the phylogenetic model is familiar as the ancient "nature vs. nurture," "nativism vs. empiricism," or "heredity vs. environment" controversy. Unlike the nature-nuture duality—where nature is generally pitted against nurture—the phylogenetic model recognizes the interaction between nature (i.e., biological state) and nurture (i.e., experience). In addition, the phylogenetic model adds the critical element, C, cognitive capability (or mental activity). Human mental activity—conscious or unconscious, intended or unintended, recognized or unrecognized—generally mediates between the biological state of individuals and their experience, thus often modifying individuals' phylogenetically acquired dispositions to respond to events in consistent ways.

2. This view is based on the assumption that mental activity (i.e., human intelligence in its broadest sense) coordinates all human experience. That is, in order to have "human experience" the experience must be processed in the brain and given meaning through "mental activity." This potential for complex mental activity, including volition (i.e., the capacity for purposive behavior) gives man his existential freedom ("free will").

3. A more complete exposition of "invulnerability" is provided in the "Multivariate Model of Child Behavior" (Rohner, 1977) which states, in effect, that the extent to which a child is vulnerable or invulnerable to the effects of parental rejection is a function (in a yet to be determined way) of his personal characteristics (C)—for example his sense of differentiated self, and his sense of personal control in his own life—in interaction with the personal characteristics and behavior of those persons important to him, especially his parents (P), and with situational (S) factors (e.g., does he have someone else with whom he can interact closely, for example, a neighbor?).

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